

THE CHURCH AND EDUCATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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I

FEW Scots writers have failed to seize every opportunity, seasonable or unseasonable, for praising the part which Scotland has played in the history of education. Its allegiance to learning has been rated hardly less than its prowess on the battlefield or its sufferings in the cause of freedom. Even careful historians, born and trained outwith our country and wonderfully free from bias towards the side of northern Britain, have paid sincere and at times lavish tribute to the academic aspirations and achievements of our ancestors. It is only of late years that some more trenchant critics have arisen to despoil our complacency, and they concern themselves more with our present position in the field than with a stalwart past. Their severest censure is that Scotland has fallen from the grace of a noble and enviable tradition. Now it is never easy to analyse the composition, or to trace the growth, of an heritage in the realm of letters ; but the attempt on such an exploit should be made from time to time lest an easy confidence in a treasured tribute should hinder progress or perpetuate an inadequate view of history.

The aim of this paper falls far short of ambitious analysis or considered appraisement ; its purpose is to test by a few documentary sources, mainly Acts of Assembly, how far the Scottish Church in the eighteenth century served the cause of education. We have often been told that the debt which Scotland owes to her schools and universities can hardly be exaggerated, that for her sons learning was not a captivating luxury but a stern necessity in the pursuit of national welfare, that in many ways our country took the lead, since the Reformation, in the quest of a learning which was democratic in that it was open to all and broke through the castes of man, and was aristocratic in that it exalted to high degree the humblest of its votaries. With some show of rhetoric we have learned that men who have hewn stone or ploughed the lonely furrow have risen to adorn the pulpit and the hospital, the law court and the House of Commons. Are these claims too highly pitched ? Have we evidence in the eighteenth century that Scotland, and particularly

the Church in Scotland, smoothed the path of the scholar and so impressed her will upon national circumstance that the youth of the land could win its birthright of learning? These are questions which merit an answer.

It is undoubted that the men who shaped the reformation of the Church in Scotland believed wholeheartedly in the education of both old and young. The actual existence of the Reformed Church depended largely on the education of its members, for it was only by moulding the religious belief of men and women that loyalty to the Protestant form of faith and polity could be bred. It was no accident that Knox and Melville were educationists as well as reformers. Their main concern was religion, but the inexorable exigencies of their era demanded that they should concern themselves with more than religion. *The First Book of Discipline*, which owed so much to John Knox, was, more than any other document, responsible for the ideal of education that has adorned Scottish Presbyterianism. Our heritage of learning owes almost everything to *The First Book of Discipline*. Let us pause to think of its words on education. "Seing that God hath determined that his Church heir in earth, shall be tawght not be angellis but by men; and seing that men are born ignorant of all godlynes; and seing, also, how God ceassith to illuminat men miraculuslie, suddanlie changeing thame, as that he did his Apostolis and utheris in the Primitive Church: off necessitie it is that your Honouris be most cairfull for the virtuous education, and godlie upbringing of the youth of this Realme. . . . Off necessitie thairfore we judge it, that everie severall Church have a Scholmaister appointed, suche a one as is able, at least, to teache Grammer and the Latine tounge, yf the Toun be of any reputioun. Yf it be Upaland, whaire the people convene to doctrine bot once in the weeke, then must eathir the Reidar or the Minister thair appointed, take cayre over the children and youth of the parische, to instruct them in thair first rudimentis, and especiallie in the Catechisme. . . . And farther, we think it expedient, that in everie notable toun, and especiallie in the toun of the Superintendent, [there] be erected a Colledge, in which the Artis, at least Logick and Rethorick, togidder with the Tongues, be read be sufficient Maisteris, for whome honest stipendis must be appointed: as also provisioun for those that be poore, and be nocht able by them selfis, nor by thair freindis, to be sustened at letteris, especiallie suche as come from Landwart. . . . Last, The great Schollis callit Universiteis, shall be repleanischit with those that be apt to learnyng; for this must be cairfullie provideit, that no fader, of what estait or conditioun that ever he be, use his children at his awin fantasie, especiallie in thair youth-heade; but all must be compelled to bring up thair children in learnyng and virtue." ¹ Knox pictured Scotland as a home of learning, but it was

¹ Knox: *Works* (ed. Laing), II, pp. 209-11.

a Utopia. His dream was statesmanlike and patriotic, but two historical facts kept it in the land of dreams—the patrimony of the Church was the prey of nobles who had other uses for it, than those of culture, sacred or profane; and the Reformed Church in the sixteenth century could not have provided the schoolmaster had she received the patrimony that was her due. Even yet it is not sufficiently realised that Knox's scheme of education, the scheme that won for Scotland so much renown as a country that loves learning, never was more in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries than the vision of what should have been.

An inquiry into the official documents of the Church of Scotland during the eighteenth century with a view to finding what was the opinion of that Church as to the education of the people, what were the methods adopting for the improvement of it, and what was the success of the consequent educational policy—such an inquiry will prove that Knox's scheme was frustrated year after year and that it was not realised even at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Principal Cunningham declared that in 1646 an Act of Parliament anticipated the legislation of the year 1696, though it was repealed at the Restoration, and that in the first Parliament of William III there was passed an Act which “gave to the country the school system which the Church, ever since the Reformation, had been aiming at, and which the country now enjoys.”¹ It is true that the Act to which he referred made it imperative upon the heritors of every parish to found a school and to provide both salary and house for the schoolmaster,² but Cunningham's language was more rhetorical than consonant with facts when he wrote that “the effect was soon seen in the wide diffusion of knowledge. The poorest peasant had it in his power to give a liberal education to his son, and men who had been trained in the parish school began to emerge from humble life,—whose proud destiny it was to enlarge the boundaries of science, to charm the world with the sweetness of their song, or to carry Scotch enterprise to every quarter of the globe.”³ A survey of the facts, as seen in General Assembly documents, certainly proves that the Church displayed considerable zeal in furthering education in the parishes of Scotland, but just as certainly proves that the policy of the Church was constantly thwarted time after time by circumstances, political, economic, and ecclesiastical.

II

What, then, are some of the prosaic facts?

In the seventeenth century it seemed that the Church was alive to

¹ Cunningham: *The Church History of Scotland* (2nd edition), II, 198.

² Act of Parliament, William III, Parl. i., Sect. vi., ch. 26.

³ Cunningham: *ibid.*, II, 199.

the educational problem, for in the year 1638 the General Assembly resolved to put into execution the Acts of 1565 by which parish ministers, the Principal, regents, and professors of colleges, and masters and doctors of schools were to be tried "concerning the soundness of their judgement in matters of religion, their abilitie for discharge of their calling, and the honesty of their conversation."¹ It was also recognised that the lack of schools prejudiced the growth of the Gospel, and it was enacted that schools should be established in every parish and that fit schoolmasters should be appointed. In 1641 the Lord High Commissioner read the royal letter of Charles I, in which he declared that "Because we want not our own feares of the decay of learning in that Church and kingdome, we intend also to consider the best meanes for helping the schooles and colledges of learning, especially of divinity, that there may be such a number of preachers there, as that each parish having a minister, and the Gospel being preached in the most remote parts of the kingdome, all our subjects may taste of our care in that kinde, and have more and more cause to blesse God that we are set over them."² In 1642 six overtures regarding education received official approval, and it was laid down that presbyteries should report on the progress made in planting of schools, that special care should be taken in the Highlands and the Borders, and that "the children of poore men (being very capable of learning, and of good engines), may be trained up." But at the close of the seventeenth century all was not well with Scottish education, for in 1690 the General Assembly was still recommending establishment of schools, craving the necessary financial aid, and deprecating the backwardness of responsible parties.³ In 1699 the Assembly pathetically referred to the "good laws and acts of Parliament, and acts of General Assemblies,"⁴ and admitted that it was necessary to urge the presbyteries to see that parochial schools should be created in accordance with such beneficent legislation.

The Acts of Assembly in the eighteenth century make clear that the ideal of a school in every parish was far from realisation. In 1704 the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr received congratulation for its efforts,⁵ but the selection was obviously for the encouragement of the others who had failed to make a similar "laudable progress." In 1705 the General Assembly was dissatisfied with what had been done, but it is noteworthy that it enjoined each presbytery to appoint a committee of their number yearly to examine scholars in the grammar schools, and to see that only pupils of proficiency and good behaviour should be encouraged with bursaries.⁶ Acts of Assembly 1706, XIII, and 1707, V, indicate that only slow progress had been made in carrying out ecclesiastical recommendations and enactments, and that the lack of

¹ 1638, Sess. 23, 24.

² 1641, Sess. I, July 20.

³ 1690, XI.

⁴ 1699, X.

⁵ 1704, XIV.

⁶ 1705, V.

financial resources was usually responsible. In 1719 a step in advance was taken, as the following record shows: "And, in like manner, where schools are wanting in any parish, the General Assembly hereby appoints that Presbyteries make legal intimation to the heritors and parishioners to meet on a certain day, and at a certain place, to stent themselves for a salary to a schoolmaster, and for the needful accommodations for him, as is appointed by 5th Act Parliament 1st, Charles I, *anno.* 1633, and 26th Act, Sess. 2d, Parliament King William, *anno.* 1696, and that they appoint a committee to meet with them; and if the heritors and parishioners, and, failing the heritors, the most part of the parishioners, do meet, they may proceed to stent, and also to proportion the money laid on; but if they either meet not, or, being met, do fail in settling a salary and providing a house for the schoolmaster, then, and in that case, the Assembly appoints the Presbytery to present a petition to the Commissioners of Supply, or any five or more of them, with an extract of the valued rent of the parish, and crave that the Commissioners may, in the terms of the foresaid Acts of Parliament, settle a school; and if the Commissioners refuse or shift the doing of it, that instruments be taken against them, and thereupon a process be commenced before the Lords of Council and Session, who have already, in the like cases, provided salaries and houses for schoolmasters. And if, when all this is done, the heritors will not call a qualified schoolmaster, the General Assembly appoints and requires the Presbytery, after the expiring of one year, to order intimation to be made from the pulpit to the heritors and parishioners to meet upon a certain day, in order to elect and present one to be schoolmaster; and if at that time they do it not, the Presbytery is appointed to present one; and, after edicts duly published with respect to him, to admit and settle him."¹

But even drastic steps by a General Assembly were unable to effect the desired end, and another proof of the unsatisfactory nature of education in many parts of Scotland is to be found in the enterprise of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. It was in 1709 that the Society took definite shape, and the work which it did in the Highlands of Scotland during the eighteenth century was so great that the highest praise should be awarded to it. Its labours were exerted in foreign parts, in the combatting of Romanism, and in the provision of schools. Within ten years of its institution the Society was in a position to report that forty-two schools had been founded. The General Assembly did all in its power to encourage the S.P.C.K., and time after time authorised collections in aid of the Society's funds.² But even the

¹ 1719, IV.

² 1709, VI; 1715, XII. Cf. 1710, XI; 1712, V; 1713, V; 1714, XIII; 1716, IV; 1719, V; 1727, IX; 1732, IV.

S.P.C.K. had its disappointments, as we can see from the Assemblies of 1749 and 1758. In the former a complaint was made that several presbyteries had neglected to hold visitations, and to take proper steps for carrying out the Church's policy of education, but "seem totally to depend upon the charity schools established by the said Society."¹ In 1758 we have some interesting statistics, for it is on record that "the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge are sorry to find, that in no less than 175 parishes, within the bounds of 39 Presbyteries where the Society's schools are erected, parochial schools are not yet erected, and of these parishes the Society have given in a list, founded on the information of the Presbyteries in which the parishes lie. The Society are extremely sensible that it would be improper for them to point out to the Assembly the fatal consequences of this neglect; these must occur to every person who considers of how much consequence it is to train up the youth of this, or of any country, in learning and Christian knowledge."²

The Acts of Assembly in the later part of the century tell a like tale of increasing attempts by the Church to realise the ideal of a Scotland in which every parish should have a well-equipped school and a comfortably provided schoolmaster. The very fact that Assembly after Assembly had to make the attempt is significant of the real state of affairs throughout the century under review.

It should be noted that the Church was earnest in its endeavours to secure the right type of schoolmaster. In the year 1700 the General Assembly appointed all presbyteries to take "special, particular, and exact notice" of all schoolmasters, chaplains, governors, and pedagogues of youth within their respective bounds. All were to subscribe the Confession of Faith, and ministers were to exercise care that the guides of youth should be free from negligence of their duties, heresy of their doctrine, and immorality of their behaviour.³ One century later we read that "The General Assembly having considered this report of the committee, who had been directed to class the reports of Presbyteries concerning schoolmasters, whether of parochial schools, or schools of any other description; and it appearing that not a fourth part of the Presbyteries of the Church have made any report, the Assembly peremptorily enjoin all the other Presbyteries of the Church to send up to next General Assembly particular reports of their obedience to the order of last Assembly."⁴ The provision of satisfactory schoolmasters during the century was found to be difficult in most rural places, and almost impossible in some of the outlying parishes. The Church certainly tried to encourage young lads who were proceeding to the ministry and to

¹ 1749, VI.² 1758, VI.³ 1700, X.⁴ 1800, XI. Cf. 1802, VI.

the teaching profession by a system of bursaries, especially bursaries for students able to speak the Gaelic tongue,¹ but the supply of divinity students was never fully adequate to the Church's needs, and that of schoolmasters was even less satisfactory.

III

It will be noticed that the minister was the unit upon whom the educational structure mainly stood or fell. Was he himself an educated man, and in what direction did his education lie? There is no lack of material upon which to base an answer. The General Assembly of 1696 exercised itself anxiously on the curriculum and training of divinity students, and enacted that only young men who could give proof of their piety, orthodoxy, and learning should be encouraged. It is noticeable that the Church insisted that a good university course was a necessary preliminary to the study of theology, and that the divinity professors should require from their students "testimonials from universities where they have studied"—an illustration of a wise tradition of learning in the Scottish Church, and of a long connection between Church and University. For example, we read: "The General Assembly, considering how necessary it is that they who declare the oracles of God to others should themselves understand them in the original languages, do require that none be licensed to preach, or ordained to the ministry, unless they give good proof of their understanding the Greek and Hebrew; and the General Assembly recommendeth to all candidates for the ministry to study also the other oriental languages, especially the Chaldaic and Syriac, so far as they can."²

In 1736 we have the procedure towards the ministry laid down in a fashion that it is not much different from what it is to-day, almost two hundred years later.³ It is enacted that the student who is a candidate for licence shall be examined in the following:

- (1) Catechetical trials.
- (2) A homily.
- (3) An exegesis.
- (4) An exercise and addition.
- (5) A lecture.
- (6) A popular sermon.
- (7) A trial on chronology and church history, especially the history of the Church of Scotland.
- (8) A trial of the student's knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages.

¹ Cf. 1710, X; 1737, VII; 1756, VII.

² 1696, XXII. Cf. 1704, X.

³ 1736, XVI. Cf. 1794, IX.

In 1798 the General Assembly gave particulars of the preparatory courses in Humanity, Greek, Mathematics, Logic, Natural and Moral Philosophy, and it enacted that no professor of divinity shall admit any student into the Divinity Hall unless he produces certificates of having studied at a University during three complete sessions.¹

There can be little doubt that the Church sincerely encouraged a high standard of learning in all who proceeded to its ministry, but there was in all probability an over-emphasis on the narrowly theological element in the divinity student's curriculum. It too often rested with himself whether or no he combined his doctrinal equipment with a broad and broadening culture.

IV

The proceedings of the General Assemblies of the years 1810, 1813, and 1819, furnish evidence of the results of the Church's educational policy during the previous century. In 1810 a Committee of the Assembly reported that fifteen presbyteries had complied with the regulation passed in 1799, which required a detailed return anent schools within the respective presbyteries, but drew attention to the fact that "so large a proportion of the Presbyteries of the Church have not transmitted reports concerning schools at all" and that some of the reports were unsatisfactory.² Three years later fourteen presbyteries sent in reports, but the Committee declared that whilst some of these were in proper order the greater part of them was not in due form. The Assembly of 1813 determined that three queries should be transmitted to every presbytery:

"1st, Is there a parochial school established in your parish, with sufficient salary and accommodation for the schoolmaster, in terms of Act, 1803? and if not, what are the reasons which have prevented compliance with the enactments of that statute?"

"2d, Are there more than one parochial school established in your parish under the authority of the aforementioned Act? and if not, would it be eligible, and why, that there should be more schools in your parish?"

"3d, What schools, other than parochial, are there in your parish? Of what description, and by whom kept and supported?"³

In 1819 the number of presbyteries which made the required returns was twenty-nine, and it was reported that most of these returns were in "very general terms." Irvine, Cupar, Forfar, Dalkeith, and Paisley were singled out for praise in that they "exhibit a laudable attention . . . to the important duties belonging to them as superintendents of public

¹ 1798, VI.

² 1810, IX.

³ 1813, X.

education within their bounds.”¹ Once more the Assembly enjoined all presbyteries to send in their reports, and in that year gave specific guidance as to the items to be included.

The conclusion seems inevitable. The Church had failed to realise the ideal which it had set before itself since the days of John Knox. There was no uniform system of education throughout the parishes. In some places there were efficient schools and schoolmasters ; in others, even when there was a school, the master was a student who had failed to reach the ministry of the Church, or a man who had but a smattering of knowledge, or a poor dependant of a heritor, or a soldier who had returned from foreign wars. Dr Alexander Carlyle waxed rhetorical when he rebutted the charge that the Church of Scotland was a poor Church, and in a well-known passage of his autobiography claimed robustly that: “There are few branches of literature in which the ministers of the Church have not excelled. There are few subjects of fine writing in which they do not stand foremost in the rank of authors, which is a prouder boast than all the pomp of the Hierarchy. We have men who have successfully enlightened the world in almost every branch, not to mention treatises in defence of Christianity, or eloquent illustrations of every branch of Christian doctrine and morals. Who have written the best histories, ancient and modern ? It has been clergymen of this Church. Who has written the clearest delineation of the human understanding and all its powers ? A clergyman of this Church. Who has written the best system of rhetoric, and exemplified it by his own orations ? A clergyman of this Church. Who wrote a tragedy that has been deemed perfect ? A clergyman of this Church. Who was the most profound mathematician of the age he lived in ? A clergyman of this Church. Who is his successor, in reputation as in office ? Who wrote the best treatise on agriculture ? Let us not complain of poverty, for it is a splendid poverty indeed.” But Jupiter Carlyle’s eloquence carried him away and must not lure us to unwise generalisations. There were learned men in the eighteenth century, men who could take their places with scholars of other countries, but they were learned in face of difficulties in the path of learning. The poverty of the Church and of many heritors in the eighteenth century, the social and economic circumstances of the era, a lack of imagination on the part of many ministers, some lukewarmness regarding the nobility of the teaching profession in the parish schools, and perhaps an undue regard for a narrow theological discipline—such were some of the considerations which prevented a widespread system of sound, elementary education in every parish of Scotland. The scholars who rose to greatness were recruited from all ranks of the people, but it was because of their love

¹ 1819, VIII.

of learning, their ability to overcome difficulties, and their resolution to profit from such instruction as they could command that they made their way. And it is true that in many parishes, even in days of poverty and indifference, there were ministers and schoolmasters who were eager and able to help all who had the desire for learning—and they had their reward not in General Assemblies and ecclesiastical reports but in the fame of their favoured pupils.

